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ABSTRACT

In "The Politics of Education" Paulo Freire considers writing evaluation to be the expression of educational ideologies. An examination of the scholarly writing in composition and rhetoric research shows a division between formative or process evaluation and summative or product evaluation, with advocates for each side. As readers, composition instructors attempt to construct students' texts--projecting on to those texts expectations, knowledge of codes, and normative beliefs regarding texts. Freire advocates that the evaluator and the learner join in evaluation, thus establishing distance from the work under consideration and achieving one of the central goals of education--demystification of inherently ideological codes. Freire's ideas were tested in writing workshops, with several important benefits: (1) evaluation became a dialogue between writers and readers, wherein reading and writing were viewed as cogenerative activities; (2) commentators never wrote directly on the students' papers, leaving the writers with authority over their texts--a dialogical model; (3) after each reader protocol session, reader expectations became clearer; and (4) reader protocols allowed the evaluator to render some particular biases less opaque and more open to question by the students. Studies show that such evaluation could eventually be viewed as a dialectical process, a transactional event between students and teachers (readers and writers), and an exploration of summative criteria as a formative process. (NKA)

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EVALUATION AS DIALOGICAL PRAXIS

Paper presented at Conference of College Composition and Communication

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Evaluation as Dialogical Praxis

As Paolo Freire notes in The Politics of Education (1985), education is never neutral (p.114), never apolitical. Education always espouses an ideology whether that ideology be conscious or unconscious, humanizing or dehumanizing. Further, as Freire and other commentators such as Richard Uhmann (1976) suggest, evaluation is deeply implicated in the political nature of education. For, evaluation is the expression of educational ideologies - normative systems which often express unconscious assumptions and consequently, perhaps, often produce dehumanizing effects.

This paper, through an analysis of Paolo Freire's notion of evaluation, will suggest that several hidden assumptions are also at work within Composition and Rhetoric research into evaluation. Specifically, this research is based upon a series of binary oppositions - between process and product, between subject and object, between formative (in process) and summative (product) evaluation. Once this dichotomy is deconstructed, as it is in Freire's model of evaluation, a far more powerful model of evaluation becomes possible. In this model, instructors and their students can begin to view formative evaluation as the process wherein summative concerns (conventions, criteria, norms) are shared and critiqued as socially constructed belief systems, as ideologies.

Brooke Horvath's (1984) distinction between formative or in process and summative or product evaluation reflects the division that has occurred in Composition and Rhetoric research regarding evaluation. Virtually every researcher into evaluation

can be aligned on either side of this great divide between process (formative) or product (summative) concerns. Advocates of formative evaluation such as Nancy Sommers (1982), C.W. Griffin (1982), Barry Kroll (1980), and Alan Purves (1984) have developed student-centered, supportive evaluation techniques while researchers such as Charles Cooper and Lee Odell (1977) have developed rationales and procedures for large-scale summative testing.

Both sides of this great divide are already experiencing difficulty with this research paradigm. Assessment researchers such as Loren Barritt (1986) note that so-called consistent and objective grading systems are not nearly as objective or consistent as their designers believe. Barritt in his two year ethnographic study of large scale testing suggests, in fact, that formative concerns, that is, concerns for the student as an individual writer, preoccupy assessors far more than Barritt and his researchers had originally believed. The problems of separating process from product are also noted by Wila Wolcott (1987) when she suggests that we are presently teaching students to write through process oriented methodologies, including formative evaluation, when, in fact, these students need to be able to write in summative writing situations.

As noted by Joe Belanger (1985), Margaret Mier (1985), and Edmund Miller (1982), many convinced formative instructors feel uneasy about responding in a supportive fashion to a paper in its draft stages and then later measuring that same paper against a strict set of standards. They point out that students can sometimes misinterpret supportive commentary on drafts as evidence

that they will receive high grades or may view tentative grades on drafts as either discouraging or too encouraging. The result at any rate is either a disgruntled student or an inadequate revision.

Further, as Nancy Sommers (1982) notes, many writing teachers find it difficult to evaluate according to formative principles. They tend, her research suggests, to appropriate student texts by overmarking them with vague and confusing commentary regarding usage and form while ignoring content. Sommers puts her finger on the heart of the problem when she writes:

> Thus, we read student texts with biases about what the writer should have ...written, and our biases determine how we will comprehend the text. We read with our preconceptions and preoccupations, expecting to find errors, and the result is that we find errors and misread our students' texts. (p. 154)

Sommers' response to this problem is interesting. She suggests that we need to reverse this approach. "Our comments," she says, "need to offer students revision tasks of a different order of complexity and sophistication from the ones that they themselves identify, by forcing students back into the chaos, back to the point where they are shaping ... their meaning" (p 154). In fact, Sommers is advocating a different set of biases, a different but still unacknowledged ideology. And, in fact, Sommers' bias is inevitable. As readers we attempt to construct our students' texts. To do so we cannot avoid projecting on to those texts our reader expectations, our knowledge of codes, our normative beliefs regarding texts, in other words the product concerns that we apply to texts. To avoid doing so would be to cease to read. But what we can do is be more aware of our criteria and its

suitability to the text we are reading. It is at this point that Freire offers a more compelling model of evaluation.

In the chapter "Peasants and Their Reading Texts" Freire specifically addresses evaluation in terms of teacher education and draws an important distinction between what he calls inspection and evaluation. Freire notes :

> Through inspection educators just become objects of vigilance by a central organization. Through evaluation everyone is a subject along with the central organization in the act of criticism and establishing distance from the work. ... Evaluation is not an act by which educator A evaluates educator B: it's an act by which educators A and B together evaluate an experience, its development, and the obstacles one confronts along with any mistakes or errors. Thus evaluation has a dialectical character. (p.23)

At first it might appear as if Freire is distinguishing summative evaluation from formative evaluation or, in his terms, separating inspection from evaluation. However, on closer analysis it becomes clear that although Freire rejects the false objectivity of inspection or summative evaluation, his validation of what he calls "evaluation" cannot be interpreted as support for formative evaluation as defined by Horvath. In Freire's terms, the evaluator cannot simply participate in the process with the student. This, according to Freire, would constitute passive acquiesence to a normative system of beliefs. Rather, the evaluator together with the learner must actively join in evaluation as a "critical act" and thus establish distance from the work or project under consideration. As Freire makes clear in other contexts, this act or praxis constitutes one of the central activities of education - the demystification of codes, codes which are inherently ideological.

Freire's view of evaluation can lead to practical

applications for writing instructors. The following describes two writing projects designed to explore the notion that formative evaluation treated as the act of disclosing and critiquing normative systems of criteria can be valuable as both a heuristic for teaching writing and as an evaluation procedure.

As part of an effort to encourage a formative approach to evaluation and to promote Writing Across the Curriculum, the following program was offered to the faculty of the University of Guelph. Faculty were informed that at their request a Writing Workshop would be conducted in their classroom. The workshop would be jointly designed by the workshop co-ordinator and the instructor and would derive its material from papers that had already been graded or annotated. Instructors and their Teaching Assistants were asked to actively participate in the workshop with their students.

During the Academic Year 1985-86 about 25 workshops were conducted in disciplines ranging from History to Wildlife Biology and were well received by both faculty and students. The model that guided the workshop designs reflected Freire's notion of evaluation. Working from already graded drafts or papers, the co-ordinator identified the areas where students obviously did not understand either formal conventions or discipline specific ways of thinking. The co-ordinator, through contrastive analysis using the student's own work on dittos or overheads, discussed in an open way with students, in the presence of their instructor, the strategies which either did or did not work in a specific assignment. The co-ordinator's role was to objectify, in Freire's

terms, the work i.e., disclose its socially constructed nature, but at the same time to subjectivize or validate the real problems that students were experiencing in their attempts to master the ways of knowing of different disciplines.

In order to fully explore the value of using Freire's model, I will describe, in case study fashion, one of these sessions conducted with Dr. Brown's fifth semester Wild Life Biology class. Dr. Brown believed in formative evaluation - so much so that he had divided the grade for the semester's research project into two grades - 30% for the draft and 70% for the final paper. Unfortunately, however, as was the custom in this course, virtually all of the students had failed the draft portion of the assignment. Most were either infuriated or discouraged by this experience.

On reading over the heavily annotated drafts, it became clear that many of these students knew the surface features of report writing but were truly bewildered by the deep structure ways of thinking embodied in this genre. For example, during a contrastive comparison of several Results and Discussion sections it became clear that many did not understand the logical distinction between the two sections. After all, several students argued since the results, for the purpose of this assignment, had been statistically analysed, were they not already interpreted? Why was a Discussion section even necessary? At this point the instructor and his Teaching Assistants joined in the debate and presented a clear rationale for the Discussion section. They were not interested in the computer results per se but in how those results related to or affected the problem at hand.

In the process of the discussion it also became evident that students were struggling with the stylistic demands of the assignment. A comparison of two passages revealed, however, that writers were being rewarded for avoiding passive constructions and yet remaining objective. This led to a spirited discussion in which the whole problem of objectivity and subjectivity and their competing ideologies were discussed. The instructor admitted that he could accept the subjective voice in scientific discourse, but that many of his colleagues could not. Accordingly, he urged students to master the objective voice only as conventional usage. This section of the workshop ended with a discussion of techniques involved in writing objectively while avoiding the passive construction.

As an outsider playing a facilitator role together with the active participation of both instructors and students (and a good deal of tact and humour) its was fairly easy to deconstruct and open up to criticism ways of knowing and evaluating characteristic of different disciplines. It is much more difficult to turn this methodology towards one's own evaluation practices. It is however, possible, to at least attempt such an enterprise.

The following dialogical model, built on the work of Bleich (1978), Fish (1980), Flower (1979), O'Hare (1985) and other commentators (Bazerman, 1980; Carey, 1985; Comprone, 1983; Ede, 1984; Gere, 1980; Kroll, 1984; Mier, 1985; Mitchell and Taylor, 1979; and Petersen, 1982) was applied to student drafts by both instructor and peer evaluators. A blank piece of paper with only

the writer's and evaluator's (i.e. reader's) names on it was attached to each draft. The evaluator then wrote on the paper commenting on the draft using a simple number system - 1 for the first comment, 2 for the second comment etc. These numbers were then placed in the margin of the draft. Thus, evaluators did not write on the draft itself. Instead they attempted to record what it was like to read the draft as honestly, specifically and helpfully as they could. Further it was agreed that all comments would be clearly written without any use of abbreviations and that readers (who were, of course, at this point writers) had to justify their comments. In other words, evaluators could not simply write down Awk or Rep or Red. They had to explain <u>why</u> or <u>how</u> the text affected them. Thus, this evaluation model, which I call the Reader Protocol model (see Flower, 1981, for Writer Protocols) asks evaluators to attempt to articulate and clarify the often unspoken and unacknowledged criteria that is being applied to the text.

Several important benefits emerged from this experiment.

1. Evaluation became a dialogue between writers and readers, a process wherein reading and writing were viewed as co-generative activities.

2. The fact that commentators never wrote directly on the student's text became an expression of a central pedagogical position i.e., that the writer had authority over his or her text.

3. After each Reader Protocol session reader expectations became clearer. For example, during a persuasive writing assignment it became evident that I, as a reader, wanted writers to discuss

alternatives to their own position. This, then became an issue in the class, an issue which I had to defend and rationalize by bringing in models of my own and others writing in order to prove that this was, in fact, an effective strategy.

4. Finally, I became aware to a larger extent of my own preconceptions. I began to see how discipline affected many of my biases are. Like many writing teachers I am a product of English Studies, English Studies which is now a battle ground of competing ideologies - New Critics versus Deconstructionists, Current Traditional Paradigmers versus New Rhetoricians. My Reader Protocols at least allowed me to render some of these biases less opaque, more open to question and thus more shareable with my students.

These case studies illustrate the role that a formative evaluator can play - the act or praxis of both dramatizing and critizing the often unconscious criteria that we apply as readers to student texts. By doing this we can avoid, perhaps, the de-humanizing education Freire describes which produces students who might say:

> Today at the university we learned that objectivity in science requires neutrality on the part of the scientist; we learned today that knowledge is pure,...and that the university is the site of this knowledge... We learned today that reality is a given, that it is our scientific impartiality that allow us to describe it somewhat as it is. Since we have described it as it is, we don't have to investigate the principal reasons that would explain it as it is. (p.118)

In fact, Freire's notion of evaluation opens up the possiblity that evaluation could be viewed as a dialectical process, a transactional event between students and teachers considered as

readers and writers, an exploration of summative criteria as a formative process.

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